

VZCZCXRO9849
OO RUEHIK
DE RUEHLM #1038/01 3201302
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 161302Z NOV 09 ZDS ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0765
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2042
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9070
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7312
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5219
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA GETS COLD FEET ON ELECTIONS

REF: COLOMBO 1030

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11. (SBU) Summary. President Mahinda Rajapaksa in a much-anticipated nationwide speech on Sunday night failed to announce either a presidential or general election. Rajapaksa instead largely gave a speech that extolled the virtues of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and took thinly-veiled swipes at the opposition and outgoing Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) General Sarath Fonseka (ref). Reaction to the speech has been relatively muted so far. The larger story of Rajapaksa's speech may be that senior SLFP leaders have started to lose confidence in the past few weeks in their ability to win a presidential election against the newly-formed opposition United National Front (UNF). End Summary.

SLFP Speech, Convention Largely Uneventful

12. (SBU) On November 15, President Mahinda Rajapaksa failed to announce either a presidential or general election in his highly anticipated address to the SLFP national convention, deciding instead to keep his electoral options open. (NOTE: The general election is slated to be held in April 2010 and the presidential election in 2011 END NOTE.) Rather than announce an election date, Rajapaksa gave a lengthy speech to SLFP party members that largely detailed the achievements of the SLFP since Rajapaksa came to power in 2005 and warned the country of those who would seek to undermine the progress of Sri Lanka in the post-war environment, especially as it relates to economic development. The President referred to Sri Lanka's new "war" as one of economic development. Many of Rajapaksa's statements were thinly-veiled swipes at the opposition and outgoing CDS General Sarath Fonseka, including his statement that "yesterday's patriot may become tomorrow's

traitor." Although Rajapaksa did take an oral count of the party cadres' views of whether a presidential election or general election should be held first (NOTE: The party cadre all voted for a presidential election to be held first, according to local press reports. END NOTE.) and laid out five resolutions to guide the party in the post-war environment, these were non-issues as the speech was largely notable for its lack of announcement of a presidential or general election.

13. (SBU) Reaction to the speech has been relatively muted so far. Senior SLFP and opposition leaders, including Fonseka, have not made public comments regarding the speech. SLFP sources told the Embassy that they do not attach much importance to Rajapaksa's speech and that the President will only announce an election date when he is ready. Opposition sources view the speech largely as an admission of defeat by Rajapaksa and assess that the President will delay calling an election until the frenzy over Fonseka as a potential presidential candidate dies down.

Comment

14. (SBU) Rajapaksa's failure to announce an early presidential or general election date probably reflects a growing lack of confidence on the part of the Rajapaksas over the past few weeks in their ability to defeat a Fonseka-led opposition in a presidential or general election. By addressing the SLFP convention, Rajapaksa allows himself to be seen as consulting his party on the way forward, but more importantly, it buys senior SLFP leaders time to decide their next political move. A well-connected and thoughtful source told us today that the President is committed to holding the presidential election in January and that he probably would announce the date on the 22nd or 23rd of November after

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consulting astrologers on the most auspicious date. The source noted that Rajapaksa assessed that delaying the election two years could be too late for his personal popularity.

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